

# Dominant Maneuver and Precision Engagement

By DENNIS J. REIMER

A trend is reemerging that, if continued, could be a catastrophe for the profession of arms. It is nothing new. In fact, it has numerous historical antecedents which raise red flags of caution. At present it takes the form of a search for technological “silver bullets” that will make wars in the future swift, precise, low cost, and bloodless—at least in terms of American lives. Unfortunately, it is being pursued at the expense of proven, balanced battlefield capabilities. This has implications on the tactical and operational levels and also limits the options available to the National Command Authorities (NCA). Faith in the unproven potential of technology is not a solid basis for strategy.

Many believe that precision strike weapons can win all future wars. Yet history has shown that the human dimension of warfare cannot be countered by technology alone. War is essentially an expression of hostile attitudes.<sup>1</sup> Technology cannot overcome the greed, fear, hate, revenge, or other emotions that cause wars. The

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Blackhawk helicopters.

U.S. Army

## EDITOR'S Note

Precision engagement and dominant maneuver are two of four operational concepts addressed in *Joint Vision 2010*. However, there is a certain danger in placing too much emphasis on precision engagement and unproven “silver bullets.” The consequences of such reliance came home to roost in Korea and Vietnam. These concepts must be balanced to provide both CINCs and the National Command Authorities with the best options. Moreover, dominant maneuver accomplishes tasks that precision engagement cannot, as proven in Kuwait, the Sinai, Macedonia, Haiti, and Bosnia. A genuine balance between precision engagement and dominant maneuver serves national security.

United States has relied on technological silver bullets in the past, sometimes with disastrous effects. In the 1930s strategic bombing promised to end war from a distance, pounding an enemy into submission before one soldier had to advance. World War II proved this wrong. By 1950 the atomic bomb was

thought to make any invasion by large, massed land forces impossible. Korea proved this wrong. In the 1960s a high tech electronic barrier was intended to stop infiltration into South Vietnam as bombing critical targets in

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the north dissuaded Hanoi from pursuing the conflict. North Vietnam proved this wrong. In 1991 some believed that a month-long intensive precision bombardment of Iraqi troops would force them to withdraw from Kuwait without a land campaign. Hope proved wrong yet again.

The cost for such wishful thinking has too often been paid by ill-prepared, untrained forces fighting desperately with their valor and blood to compensate for the lack of strategic forethought. Deployment of Task Force Smith to the Republic of Korea in July 1950 provides a harsh lesson about

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this dangerous trend. Although the United States was the only superpower in June 1950, North Korea—at best a third-rate power—attacked and almost triumphed over South Korea before a defensive perimeter was formed around Pusan. The north was only kept from overrunning the entire peninsula by vastly outnumbered, ill-equipped, tired, and hungry soldiers and marines who were supported by superhuman efforts of sailors and airmen, striking at the enemy from the sea and sky. It took three months to restore the battlefield balance necessary for decisive effects.

Historically, the advantage of fully balanced capabilities has been overwhelming. During Desert Storm a month of strategic and operational-level bombing, much with precision weapons, set the preconditions for the coalition ground attack that ended the war in 100 hours with minimal casualties. As T.R. Fehrenbach recognized:

*You may fly over a land forever; you may bomb it, pulverize it, and wipe it clean of life—but if you desire to defend it, protect it, and keep it for civilization, you must do this on the ground, the way the Roman legions did, by putting your young men into the mud.*<sup>2</sup>

The main argument of this article is that we must strike the right balance between precision engagement and dominant maneuver. Balance on the strategic level offers vital options to NCA. On the operational level it provides CINCs with decisive capabilities.

### Strategic Balance

Balanced capabilities provide a wide array of choices to decisionmakers, allowing us to use our strength against enemy weakness. In 1950 in Korea we lacked an adequate ground maneuver capability. Recognizing that and anticipating that we lacked the resolve to defend the south, North Korea attacked. President Truman faced a choice of abandoning South Korea, thereby damaging U.S. prestige, or employing unprepared and severely understrength ground forces. Our reserves of World War II equipment and veteran personnel eventually turned the tide but at a terrible price—attrition warfare fought over the harsh Korean terrain against a massive and determined enemy.

In 1990 President Bush was much more fortunate. With a military that had been skillfully prepared to deter the Soviet Union, he was able to defeat Saddam Hussein with both massive and precise fires from various platforms and an immensely capable ground assault which hit directly at Iraq's center of gravity, its army. It was the combination of precision engagement and dominant maneuver that destroyed the enemy force.

In 1994 and 1995 President Clinton faced similar situations in Haiti and Bosnia. He had many options to deal with these crises—capabilities beyond silver bullets that would not work then and will not work tomorrow. It was forces on the ground with balanced full spectrum dominance that successfully secured U.S. interests.

Technological advances bring radically increased lethality and mobility. The probability of operations at the mid to lower end of the operational spectrum, coupled with new requirements to simultaneously maintain a dominant maneuver capability, will place added burdens on joint forces. Increased urbanization and the prospect

of combat in cities are further considerations. Our goal must be to field a capabilities-based force proficient in operating in all dimensions of conflict.

Balance provides choices. When this balance has been lacking in the past, NCA has been forced into a strategic box—and the Nation has paid a high toll in treasure and blood to get out.

### Operational Concepts

Balanced capability is equally important to CINCs. Maneuver and fires have always been primary elements of combat power. In dominant maneuver these qualities are inextricably linked. This allows forces to move into positional advantage to deliver direct or indirect fires to control or destroy an enemy's will to fight. Fires provide the destructive force and facilitate maneuver.

Precision engagement significantly contributes to successful operations. However, it cannot fully dominate battlespace across the conflict spectrum by itself. While precision engagement can shape the battlespace, it cannot accomplish all operational tasks. In practical terms there are never enough fires, and many of them can be countered. Following the first strikes, the track record of precision engagement in recent operations indicates that no matter how effective a weapon system may be at first, the surviving enemy soon adapts psychologically and technologically.

CINCs need the synergism of simultaneous dominant maneuver and precision engagement. This holistic approach to maneuver and fire creates the conditions for decisive outcome. Dominant maneuver and precision engagement bring complementary, unique capabilities to national security requirements. Joint doctrine describes this process. Joint Pub 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, recognizes maneuver as:

*[the means] to gain positional advantage relative to enemy centers of gravity in order to control or destroy those centers of gravity. The focus of . . . maneuver is to render opponents incapable of resisting by shattering their morale and physical cohesion . . . rather than to destroy them physically through attrition.*



M-1 tanks on patrol in Saudi desert.



U.S. Army



Searching for weapons, Haiti.

Combat Camera Imagery (Val Gempis)

Full spectrum dominance depends upon a balance of dominant maneuver and precision engagement supported by focused logistics and full-dimensional protection. Dominant maneuver and precision engagement allow shaping the battlespace and conducting decisive operations. Focused logistics ensures that our forces have the right stuff at the right time, and full-dimensional

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protection provides them freedom of action through multi-layered defenses.

Dominant maneuver has been a central operational concept across the full range of military operations since before the Cold War ended. It is employed by all components of the joint

force. Demonstrated relevance and practical utility guarantee it a decisive role well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

At the high end of the operations spectrum, precision engagement provided protection and shaped the battlespace in Kuwait, but it took joint forces in the dominant maneuver role to drive out the

Iraqis and guard against their return. The same can be said for other recent military operations. Where the threat or application of precision engagement did not have the desired effect, it took fires and the psychological and positional advantage of dominant maneuver to establish and maintain the peace. Operations in the Sinai, Macedonia, Haiti, and recently Bosnia-Herzegovina further testify to the role of dominant maneuver in operational tasks. Developing the blend of people and matériel

that performed so magnificently in these and other operations took years.

### The Challenge

We are building tomorrow's military capabilities today. We don't want to eliminate options for the future NCA. Nor do we want to deny full spectrum dominance to a future CINC.

*Joint Vision 2010* understands this challenge and provides a coherent picture of the future, a template for services to develop their unique capabilities. It also reveals the implications for

joint operations with regard to four emerging operational concepts: full dimensional protection, focused logistics, dominant maneuver, and precision engagement. Properly developed and applied, these concepts will enable us to dominate a range of military operations and achieve our full potential.

*JV 2010* presents the identity and purpose of our forces. It gives credit to the high quality of the military and encourages initiative. It positively displays American military preparedness for tomorrow. The vision is relevant and realistic in terms of challenges to our interests and those of both allies and friends. More importantly, it is shared and accepted within the joint community, thus setting the stage for the refinement and further development of joint doctrine.

Joint doctrine provides the holistic

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basis for the services. It allows them to incorporate new ideas, technologies, and organizational design and to develop the flexible, innovative, imaginative, and problem-solving leaders required to conduct modern military operations. Although technology is advancing at an increasing pace, we must not make the mistake of relying on that alone. As the 17<sup>th</sup> century Japanese warrior Miyamoto Musashi said, "You should not have a favorite weapon."<sup>3</sup> While technological silver bullets have sometimes greatly influenced tactics and specific operations, their impact on warfare is perishable. As noted, it is the adoption and application of appropriate strategy, doctrine, and balance of operational concepts that ensure the outcome of conflict.

Looking to the future, we must maintain the equilibrium between dominant maneuver and precision engagement. Overreliance on one at the expense of the other can have severe results. Any adversary with money and access to world markets can get all the high tech systems he wants. Moreover, using precision engagement systems

crosses a threshold of violence, reducing options available to military and political leaders.

Like our predecessors, we must harmonize dominant maneuver and precision engagement to meet our national security needs and prevent a shortsighted solution to operational requirements. Our challenge is to avoid dependence on rigid, fleeting, one-dimensional strategies that are overly reliant on precision engagement or dominant maneuver. Such strategies create imbalances among the operational concepts, reduce strategic choices, and threaten a return to attrition warfare with its high price in human suffering.

We must harmonize our investment in, and application of, these two operational concepts. As potential adversaries study the American way of warfare to identify our weaknesses, shifting to unbalanced strategies may have serious consequences. The world recognizes our infatuation with precision strike, reluctance to commit forces for long periods, aversion to taking casualties, fear of collateral damage, and sensitivity to domestic and world opinion. Those who do not wish us well understand where our strengths and weaknesses lie and may act accordingly.

Thus it is even more important to balance dominant maneuver, particularly on the ground, with precision engagement. Ground forces employing dominant maneuver in a show of force may resolve many issues without using lethal means. More important, applying maneuver forces sends an unequivocal message of U.S. resolve. If the friction between dominant maneuver and precision strike continues unabated, the ability to conduct such operations may be compromised.

Our record of anticipating change is mixed. History teaches that those who failed to see the future had a narrow focus, became complacent, or were captivated by passing fads and short-lived technological advances. Today's military leaders must balance dominant maneuver with precision engagement, thereby leveraging the decisive effects of positional advantage and psychological impact to achieve strategic objectives quickly and at minimum cost.

War is a political act. It is also essentially linked to human nature, which doesn't change as fast or often as technology. We cannot eliminate the irrational aspects of war through a purely technical solution. The objective of war is to achieve the strategic aims set by our political leaders. Precision engagement allows us to destroy things and shape the battlespace. Dominant maneuver allows us to obtain decisive victory through a combination of fires and maneuver. Only through decisive victory or the undisputed ability to achieve it can U.S. national interests be assured.

Our military is the world's finest because years ago farsighted leaders developed, modified, and embodied strategic and operational concepts that produced the outstanding equipment, training programs, doctrine, and servicemembers who comprise the joint team. Our challenge is to prevent past mistakes. This will require leaders farsighted enough to establish the equilibrium between dominant maneuver and precision engagement needed to maintain our preeminent status.

A major role of our defense and foreign policy in the coming decades will be to deter and defeat aggression against the United States or our allies. Demonstrated war-winning competence, based on strategic and operational concepts of dominant maneuver and precision engagement, and coupled with a devastating retaliatory capability, will help guarantee our national security. **JFQ**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> T. R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 427.

<sup>3</sup> Miyamoto Musashi, *A Book of Five Rings*, translated by Victor Harris (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1982), p. 48.